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ABSTRACT

The essence of school-based decision-making is accepting the importance of decentralization and placing emphasis on process in planning efforts. "Synergistic planning" may be a more realistic term, instead of planning, to convey meaning to educators concerning educational organizations. In this model, all people in the organization look at the "situation as a whole" before action is taken on the incremental parts. In a strategic planning process in educational institutions, different people would be looking at different questions and the analysis would proceed at many levels. The objective of synergistic planning is to facilitate the redistribution of resources, recognizing that everyone in the organization is vitally concerned with how resources and relationships could be made more equitable. The background of planning in education is given and leads to the conclusion that through synergistic planning, local schools can negotiate for real changes, not just rhetoric. The issues in synergistic planning include the difficulty of building fragile values into decision-making models, student growth measurement, data collection and interpretation, and the loss of public confidence and integrity in educational matters. The purposes of synergistic planning, personnel issues, and collegiality are addressed. (RR)

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SYNERGISTIC PLANNING:

THE ESSENCE OF SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

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SYNERGISTIC PLANNING:

THE ESSENCE OF SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

Accepting the importance of decentralization and emphasis on process in planning efforts is the essence of school-based decision-making. Researchers and educators believe numerous issues could best be, and perhaps in a few areas only be, identified at the local school level. Planning may not be the most operative word for discussion, synergistic planning may be a more realistic term to convey meaning to educators concerning educational organizations. The capacity for synergistic planning should be fostered in the staffing of all schools and should be reflected in the work of all educational decision-making bodies. In this model, all people in the organization look at the "situation as a whole" before action is taken on the incremental parts. In a strategic planning process in educational institutions, different people would be looking at different questions and the analysis would proceed at many levels. The objective of synergistic planning is to facilitate the redistribution of resources, recognizing that everyone in the organization is vitally concerned with how resources and relationships could be made more equitable.

SYNERGISTIC PLANNING:
THE ESSENCE OF SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

It is widely recognized that the educational system is presently characterized by multiple centers of decision-making. The management of education must thus be approached at many levels--the national level, the state level, the district level, and the local school level. Recent reforms have suggested that educational planning be focused increasingly on the desirability of decentralized organizational arrangements. Highly centralized planning at the top of large institutional units has often been shown to be ineffective, leading to difficulties, and in some cases, disaster. There is a need to confront and resolve problems at their lowest level, moving up the organizational hierarchy only as necessary to deal with overarching concepts or issues involving major educational concerns. With educational and governmental bureaucracies expanding, the probability of numerous inconsistencies and untidy situations continues to plague educational planners and decision makers.

Because so many large issues can be better understood if analyzed from different perspectives, educational planners recently have become concerned with the general process of planning as a means of gaining consensus about the future directions of schools. Often this is difficult in a political arena where school

systems frequently insist on basic agreement on objectives before they will seriously consider alternate steps. This is an understandable approach. In many situations, however, planning usefully can focus, not on the definition of ultimate objectives, but on the kind of short- and long-term analysis which will permit agreement on subsequent steps. In some situations an attempt to fix basic objectives would destroy hope of needed agreement.

BACKGROUND

The general planning which accompanied the educational order created following the 1960s has been disrupted sufficiently to make administrators and policy makers believe that a substantially revised educational decision-making and planning structure is probably inevitable. The schools that appear to be the most vulnerable are those whose leadership cannot articulate the growth achievement of their students. Consequently, some form of overall assessment and planning appears to be essential for these schools. At the present time a revised planning model is being undertaken at various levels of the educational system and on the basis of data which in many cases is incomplete, unreliable, or both. In essence, the question becomes one of resource management at the lowest level, the school level. Resource management has important implications for any analysis of whether centralized decision-making will impose fundamental restrictions on satisfactory patterns of educational growth.

Intervention in the affairs of the local school historically has been taken for granted. However, intervention is increasingly becoming a policy and planning question. Who has the right and/or the responsibility to intervene in the operation of the local school? With improved information, technical assistance, research, evaluation, consensus building and investment in the infrastructure of the school, intervention can become a dinosaur--a thing of the past.

One of the major problems with the centralized resource distribution and decision-making pattern is that the "trickle down" approach did not effectively reach the lower level, the local school. The concept of minimum educational needs puts the centralization problem in a truer and more realistic perspective. Definitions of need, derived in a synergistic analysis, can provide more meaningful goals and objectives than those formulated in national or state terms. Through synergistic planning local schools can negotiate for real changes, not just rhetoric.

ISSUES IN SYNERGISTIC PLANNING

History has illustrated the difficulty of building fragile values into decision-making models. The systems planning approach had a great deal to contribute in its emphasis on the "interacting whole" and in providing the planner not only with a view of the whole, but with insights on the possible results of alternative ways of handling important issues of public or educational policy. Consequently,

improved systems for data collection, storage, analysis, and assessment have major implications for more effective educational planning. In the synergistic planning model, there exists a means of determining critical needs, deciding how reliable data can best be secured, and how it could best be assessed. A principal's capability in these areas can provide important and indispensable support for an upgraded and integrated planning function at the local school level. The central issue of educational reform is not whether student growth has taken place, but whether there have been qualitative and quantitative changes in the types of growth. In other words, can growth be measured?

Much of the current data available and used in schools has distinct limitations. Principals and other educational leaders are having increasing difficulty in sounding convincing when talking about one thing at a time. Synergistic planning suggests that educational leaders face up to the conceptual reality that it is difficult to treat a number of concepts, both intellectually and institutionally, in an integrated way. Given the newly-perceived interrelationships among issues previously treated as functionally separate, it is clear that new ways of planning for the handling of these issues must be developed. Technological developments, such as the use of computers for communication, data storage and data analysis, present administrators with broad new opportunities. Advances in data collection and interpretation, if properly applied, can be invaluable tools for dealing with local school issues. Ultimately,

administrators can have at their disposal a wider range of information bearing on the conditions at a local school than ever before. The challenge to the administrator for utilizing these new technologies effectively will be threefold: first, to make use of synergistic planning and related methologies to determine how the problems can best be addressed; second, to establish effective and integrated systems for monitoring and data collection; and third, to ensure the appropriate and timely assessment and distribution of data, particularly in areas involving high risk. Of central importance is the definition of the data to be sought in each of the areas selected for priority consideration.

A second consequence is the loss of public confidence and integrity in educational matters. Many researchers believe that educational administration as an academic discipline is struggling to deal with dynamic relationships that are difficult to assimilate into current educational theory. Educators are now being forced to come to terms with the need for analytical work extending beyond the day-to-day time span with which many in the discipline feel comfortable. Education, as a profession, is having a difficult time dealing with the dynamics of continual change and development. However, the concepts of change are indigenous to the present educational and societal climate and are the realities faced daily by educational administrators.

PURPOSES FOR SYNERGISTIC PLANNING

There are four different purposes for synergistic planning: program planning, policy assessment, analysis of critical issues, and analysis of change. Several researchers and educational leaders have suggested that the efforts at program and administrative coordination in the centralized educational system have serious limitations. In addition, most local schools are impatient with overlapping programs and the proliferation of centralized policies and procedures that hamper the efficient and effective operation of local schools. Clearer conceptions of how programs can be integrated or be made mutually reinforcing at the central and school level could facilitate realistic planning and link planning to action in the school. New technologies of systems analysis can be valuable to the administrator, both in terms of providing a methodology through which new insights into problem areas and their interrelationships may be gained, and in presenting an analytical framework by which these problems can be considered as a whole.

PERSONNEL ISSUES

Overarching program decisions would continue to be made by the relevant centralized machinery. Through new synergistic planning methods, principals would have access to more complete analyses and therefore would be likely to make more functional decisions. While this planning development would involve

analysis and leadership at the senior level of the school district, the real synergy for the model takes place in the local school. Detailed planning should take place at the functional, or local school, level. With detailed planning taking place at the local school level, synergistic planning would need to involve a substantial improvement in data analysis as well as the active participation of all those involved in implementing the planning stages. In some situations synergistic planning could be based on the prior analysis of ad hoc groups called together for limited purposes. Such groups could have particular usefulness where school personnel from different levels or grades have inadequate opportunities for collaborative work on long-term analysis, or where there is a need for a one-time assessment of a critical issue. Many of the major errors in planning come from a lack of vertical participation in the planning process. Personnel should become familiar with problems at all levels within the organization. Some have suggested that key personnel be given an opportunity for work or observation in related but different settings to acquaint them with problems in different areas of the school. Some other researchers and practitioners have advocated personnel rotation similar to that practiced by some religious organizations. In fact, some superintendents advocate the rotation of principals in a cyclic approach for a variety of reasons, but primarily to keep them current on problems in different areas.

No matter how impressive the synergistic planning process, its effectiveness will ultimately depend upon the quality and imagination of the key staff personnel. Imaginative and resourceful people can make an enormous difference. Such people should be attracted to this kind of enterprise. There can be no disagreement with the need for an integrated but decentralized system of decision-making with close collegial relationships among all involved.

The basic problems with the current approach to planning is the difficulty of ensuring teacher support of even the most well-conceived conclusions or expert recommendations. If teachers feel that they have not been involved in the data collection, assessment, or policy development process, or if they believe that recommended policies imply value judgments that they do not share, they may be unwilling to accept those recommendations, no matter how sensible and high quality the recommendations may appear.

COLLEGIALITY

The synergistic planning approach presents an effort to bring teachers, administrators, and stake-holders into a new, closer, more collegial relationship, with the expectation that needed institutional change will result. It is clear that local schools cannot be expected to play an effective, integrated role in synergistic planning without a new pattern of collegial cooperation between participants and the school district. The hoopla surrounding school-based management, that "the

times demand it" has no significance without a major new thrust rooted in the conviction by the school district that the process will work.

CONCLUSION

Effective monitoring operations and reliable data bases are of limited use without the capability for data interpretation, for assessment of implications, and for ensuring appropriate and effective utilization of data. Given the dynamics of the current educational system, a centralized approach to new educational problems is not feasible at present--either because of resistance from education professionals or the public. Yet it is obvious that more integrated approaches based on more clearly identified goals would be desirable. The human resources of the educational system are great, and if mobilized effectively could go a long way toward meeting the challenges which the schools now face. Can the educational establishment rise to meet these challenges or do the answers lie outside the educational system? The answer remains to be seen. In either case, it is clear that any move toward more effective synergistic planning cannot be successful without strong leadership on the part of school leaders, without strong public support, and without some attitude alteration by school communities.